ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE 30

NEWSWEEK
13 April 1987

The Contras Won't Change

Washington quits its effort to bring democratic reform and civilian control to the rebels

For months now the Reagan administration has been trying to reform the Nicaraguan contras. With the desperate enthusiasm of a temperance campaigner in a saloon full of drunks, the administration has been trying to persuade autocratic contra leaders to accept democratic procedures and rebel military commanders to submit to civilian control. It's a tough sell. Sometime soon the contras will announce the creation of a new umbrella organization called the Nicaraguan Resistance. There will be a lot of talk about political reforms and newfound unity among the various rebel factions. But the changes will be mostly cosmetic. Among other things, the formation of the Nicaraguan Resistance will mark the return to power of Adolfo Calero, the movement's strongest political boss, only two months after he was forced out by the advocates of democracy and civilian control. The net result of the reform effort, as a contra official named Carlos Ulvert puts it, will be "to throw the reformers out."

According to both U.S. and contra sources, Calero's resurgence reflects a decision by the State Department, the National Security Council staff and the CIA that the most pressing need is for the rebels to achieve some kind of military success, even if that means putting reform on the back burner. Deciding not to risk turmoil in the contras' high command, the administration opposed an effort by the reformers to purge senior officers who had served under the old Somoza dictatorship. Now the contras are infiltrating troops into Nicaragua from their bases in Honduras and have begun an offensive that consists mostly of attacks on economic targets, such as power lines. When the leftist rebels in El Salvador resorted to such tactics, U.S. officials proclaimed it a sign of weakness, arguing that attacks on nonmilitary targets reduce popular support for the insurgents. Last week, however, the contras were outdone by the Salvadoran rebels, who attacked a strongly defended military base, killing an American Green Beret, the first U.S. adviser to die in combat there (following story).

Tight money: Unless the contra offensive produces a few victories of its own, the White House may have a hard time persuading Congress to vote additional aid to the rebels. The administration has said it wants $105 million for the contras this year. But with contra aid becoming an annual political battle, Reagan strategists may try to break the cycle by asking for 18 months' worth of financing, which could amount to as much as $200 million. The catch is that the effort to reform the contra movement, which many members of Congress had insisted on as a condition for U.S. financial support, now has been superseded.

The reform campaign hit its high-water mark last Feb. 16, when Calero resigned from the three-man directorate of the current umbrella organization, the United Nicaraguan Opposition (UNO). The administration had encouraged the move, hoping to avoid a break with the other, moderate members of the directorate, Arturo Cruz and Alfonso Robelo. But Calero remained the political leader of the main rebel army, the Nicaraguan Democratic Force (FDN), and waged an effective campaign against his former colleagues. Cruz, a defector from the Sandinista government, alienated many Nicaraguan exiles who regarded his frequent threats to resign from UNO as an invitation for Washington to meddle in contra affairs. Sources said the CIA worried that Cruz would undermine the war effort by antagonizing the contras' top field commander, Col. Enrique Bermúdez. One American source says the CIA sent Cruz "clear signals that he shouldn't push too hard" for reform and that he should be "deferential to the good colonel." Cruz resigned in despair. "UNO is a corpse," he said last week.

'A human face': Administration officials disagree. "It is just not true that the reform movement is in disarray," insists one. U.S. policymakers blame Cruz for his own demise, charging that his indecision "pulled the rug out from under the other reformers," as one of them describes it. They regard Calero as an irresistible force. "You just can't get rid of Calero," says one official. "He represents a legitimate, large segment of the community." One administration hand predicts that some reforms will be announced this week. "Even the FDN has come a long way," he maintains. "They recognize the need for a human face, for participatory democracy, for civilian hegemony. It's been painful, but they're heading in the right direction."

The new Nicaraguan Resistance certainly will have the trappings of democracy: seven directors and an assembly of 48 members, representing all or most of the factions. But Nicaraguans close to the political negotiations say Calero and the 10,000-man FDN will dominate both the directorate and the assembly. Robelo, the last remaining moderate leader, discounted rumors that he intended to resign. "I'm in it till the end," he told NEWSWEEK. But he added an important caveat: "It depends on the results of the reforms. Then I'll decide if I will be a candidate for the [new] directorate."

By one independent estimate, the contras have infiltrated about 7,000 men into Nicaragua so far, and their new offensive against economic targets is beginning to produce modest results. Two weeks ago the rebels blew up part of the power line that carries electricity between Costa Rica and Nicaragua. Elsewhere in the country they have attacked other power lines, as well as farm co-ops and lumber enterprises. In the Fifth Military Region in the southeast, the Sandinistas have forcibly evacuated hundreds of peasants, in order to prevent them from helping the contras, and have created a free-fire zone. A number of the contra attacks have been carried out by a specially trained, 200-man commando unit, some of whose members have parachuted into Nicaragua from CIA planes.

Hit and run: Many of the attacks, however, have proved to be inept or inconsequential. Last month, for example, the contras set off charges at an electrical tower in Managua but managed to damage only one of its four posts. Equipment failures produce more blackouts than do contra attacks, and the Nicaraguan economy suffers far more from U.S. economic pressure and Sandinista mismanagement than from any damage the rebels may do. One Western observer in Managua says the only thing the contras are good at is "breaking off contact." He adds: "The contras need to be able to mass and hit a big military target successfully. They probably won't be able to do that in the near future."

What if the contra offensive fails? Even in defeat the rebels might be able to hang on for years in a few Nicaraguan strongholds, supplied by air. But it's also possible that thousands of beaten guerrillas and the peasants who supported them might swarm into Honduras, a country that fervently hopes it has seen the last of the Nicaraguan rebels. As far as the Hondu-

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rans are concerned, the responsibility would be Washington's. "If the contras disintegrate and return to Honduras, it would no longer be a military problem, but a social problem," Honduran President José Azcona told NEWSWEEK. "[The United States and Honduras] have talked, and we are certain they would help resolve that problem." "No guarantees, no guarantees," insisted a U.S. official in Tegucigalpa. "We have discussed it, and what we have said is, 'Look at our record in other, similar circumstances, such as Cuba and Vietnam'." But to some contras, those precedents suggest that the rebels may ultimately be abandoned by the United States. We are beginning to fear that this will be another Bay of Pigs," exiled Nicaraguan banker Roberto Arguello said in Miami.

Washington hopes the contras will be able to score a few mildly impressive victories by September, when the case for more aid will be taken to Congress. The administration will make an all-or-nothing stand. It will offer Congress no alternative to the stark choice between giving the contras more aid and cutting them off entirely. The administration is betting that, with the 1988 election coming up, most members of Congress will not want to take responsibility for abandoning the rebels.

But Congress may try to impose an alternative policy of its own. In a letter last week, three Republican senators—William Cohen of Maine, Nancy Kassebaum of Kansas and Warren Rudman of New Hampshire—warned President Reagan that they may switch their support away from the contras unless the administration puts more effort into the search for a negotiated solution in Nicaragua. With the rebels sagging, and with the Iran-contra affair still dogging Reagan's presidency, the United States and its surrogates may yet be forced to talk instead of fight.

RUSSELL WATSON *with* ROBERT PARRY *and* DAVID NEWELL *in Washington,* JOSEPH CONTRERAS *in Managua and* DAVID L. GONZALEZ *in Miami*

Salvador's Rebels: Alive and Deadly

The rebels' careful planning paid off. At 2 in the morning, while most of the soldiers at the garrison in northern El Salvador were asleep, leftist guerrillas from the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) moved in. From three sides of the El Paraíso base the guerrillas unleashed a barrage of rockets and mortars. The deafening burst woke S/Sgt. Gregory Fronius, the only U.S. military adviser then at the base. Fronius sprinted out of his quarters, past the blazing garrison headquarters and intelligence center, and away from the barracks at the south of the compound. As he dashed up a flight of stairs, a bullet hit him in the chest. He fell; seconds later a mortar exploded nearby. The 27-year-old American and 69 Salvadoran soldiers died in the two-hour attack. Only eight guerrillas lost their lives.

Last week's assault at El Paraíso stung the government of President José Napoleón Duarte and humiliated the country's American-trained armed forces. Despite $700 million of U.S. aid and six years of nurturing by the U.S. Special Forces, the Salvadoran Army cannot always protect heavily fortified installations. The rebel blitz came just nine months after a similar assault on a base outside the eastern city of San Miguel. It also capped three months of stepped-up rebel activity: FMLN fighters resumed hit-and-run attacks in San Salvador and caused three recent traffic stoppages that paralyzed the country's highways.

New opportunity: The attack came as Duarte is wrestling with his worst political crisis since taking office in 1984. As he tries to reverse El Salvador's economic slide and rebuild the capital after a devastating earthquake six months ago, he faces increasing opposition from the revitalized right as well as the left. Says one European diplomat in San Salvador: "The rebels sense quite rightly that the government is weaker now than it has been for some time—and that weakness gives them an opportunity that they should not pass up."

If last week's raid showcased the strengths of the guerrillas, it also pointed up failings in the Salvadoran military. In the last six years the Army has grown from about 10,000 troops to 42,000. With Washington's help the new Army is better trained and equipped than in the past, but recently the troops have seemed complacent and sloppy. Just days before the El Paraíso attack, soldiers spotted 400 rebels moving to the north of the base; the warning sign seems to have been ignored. Security at the base had been tightened after an FMLN attack three years ago, but several guerrillas managed to enter the base to set explosive charges, and it was likely that FMLN fighters had infiltrated the garrison to get details about its layout. The fact that no officers were killed or seriously wounded also raised suspicions that some officers may have fled into the base's underground tactical-operations center.

Despite the apparent resurgence of FMLN confidence, U.S. officials insist the guerrillas remain incapable of achieving a military victory. "They have always had the capacity to organize one of these spectacular raids," said a senior Defense Department official. "This is saying, 'Hey, we're here. We're alive.' If they could pull off three or four more, *then* I'd be surprised." High-visibility attacks like the one at El Paraíso keep rebel morale high—but they are unlikely by themselves to tilt the strategic balance in El Salvador. The war, which has already taken 62,000 lives, is expected on all sides to last well into the 1990s. Sergeant Fronius—the sixth U.S. serviceman to die in El Salvador and the first to perish in combat—will probably not be the last U.S. casualty.

NANCY COOPER *with* JOSEPH CONTRERAS *in San Salvador and* DAVID NEWELL *in Washington*

No escape: *Sergeant Fronius*

Sloppy security? *Evacuating a Salvadoran Army casualty*

IVAN MONTECINOS—AFP